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Organizing Visual Information of Traditional Ornaments Adorned by Embhan's Ring Ladies

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Abstract

This article aims to discuss an alternative system to organize information in the context of visual ethnography study particularly on the documentation of diminishing traditional ornaments worn by the remaining Ring Ladies of Embhan Community, the only community in Sarawak who still practice this culture. The system was developed based on problems faced by the researcher when visual and data collected during the investigation has difficulty with storage due to the lack of a systematic compilation method. Thus, it is challenging for the researcher to identify or retrieve the information, especially relating to visual data on the cultural objects. Through visual ethnography method, visual information related to cultural objects of Bidayuh Embhan particularly with the Ring Ladies was collected and analyzed. Hence, an alternative system in organizing visual information relating to the cultural object called, Digital Ethnographic Organizer (e-Divo) was created using Adobe InDesign and

published in a Flash format. It is hoped that this system can be developed further as an information seeking tool that can be used in the context of cultural objects and ethnography exhibition, especially in the galleries or museums.

Keywords: Traditional Ornaments, The Ring Ladies, Semban, Bidayuh, Sarawak

Introduction

In the context of Social Science research, especially involving visual ethnography methods, the usage of visual data such as photos, videos and sketches is argued to be more effective compared to text-based data (Rafee, et. al, 2015). Riviera (2010) also explained as cited from Pink (2001), the relevance of using photography, video, and hypermedia as convenient tools for visual ethnography. It is also reported by Schembri and Boyle (2013), which argued that the visual text collected through the process of cultural immersion can serve as an effective and credible research tool in the quest to collect and analyze empirical evidence as well as disseminate research findings.

Thus, this method has been applied during the documentation process of Embhan community, a sub-tribe Bidayuh from Kampung Semban, one of the remote villages in Bengoh Range, Padawan, Sarawak. This community has been made known through the popular featuring of their last remaining 'Ring Ladies', a special group of ladies adorned with brass coiled rings on their forearms and calves. Although the culture of the Bidayuh Embhan is unique, almost no literature related to the Ring Ladies can be found except by Rafee et al. (2012) and several articles in the newspaper and magazine such as Chan (2016), Sobri (2011) and Ritchie (2010).

These special ladies wore brass-rings around their calves called '*rasunk'ng*' (pronounced *lasung* – figure 1), and the forearms known as '*ruyank'ng*' (pronounced *luyang* – figure 2). These coiled brass rings are worn as early as six years-old and in the past, only women who wear these rings could take part in the 'eagle' dance during festive rites at the village. Hence, women without rings will have difficulties to find a husband, as it was a social standard of beauty in the old Bidayuh Embhan community of Kampung Semban.

However, the tradition stopped abruptly towards the end of 1960s whereby younger generations were required to attend school, and young girls were obliged by the rules of not wearing any type of accessories at school. In 2013, the villagers of old Kampung Semban were moved to Bengoh Resettlement Scheme at Padawan District (Chan, 2016). Previously, there were seven Ring Ladies available in Kampung Semban, but today there are left with only five because two ageing members had stopped wearing the rings due to their health issues. Among the five remainders, it was found that there are two new members from the new generation. Despite of wearing the rings at the late age of 40, their inclusion was nevertheless seen as a positive effort toward preserving and continuing their diminishing tradition.